

BRITISH ACADEMY LECTURE

Is There Always an Underclass?

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I AM HONOURED TO HAVE BEEN INVITED to give this second British Academy Lecture, which is at the same time the first to be delivered in the Academy's new building and the first to be allocated to the social sciences as opposed to the humanities. As a sociologist, indeed, I am particularly grateful for the recognition accorded to my own discipline, which is all too often—and sometimes rightly—dismissed as neither science nor scholarship. In this lecture, however, I shall take it to be both. I shall take it, that is, to be what Max Weber took it to be in his famous lecture of 1919 on the vocation of *Wissenschaft*—the German term in which our insular distinction between what we call science and what we call scholarship is not so much transcended as simply not recognised at all.¹

In saying this, I am not seeking to disparage the writings of those for whom sociology is, or should be, a matter of literature and philosophy rather than science and scholarship. The formulation of generalised reflections on human history and the human condition in the tradition from Hegel to Habermas is no less authentic and reputable an intellectual activity than the collection of quantitative data and formulation of testable hypotheses about human social behaviour in the tradition from Sir William Petty to Sir Tony Wrigley. Come to that, my topic is one which could just as readily be approached through the novels of

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¹ Max Weber, 'Wissenschaft als Beruf', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 524–55.

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Dickens as through the tables of the British Household Panel Survey published by the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change. But in this lecture, I shall remain on the dry, if not always firm, land of *Wissenschaft*, rather than venturing onto the stormy sea where pundits, prophets, and policy advisers debate their conflicting visions of the Good Society; and I shall be drawing on the ideas of the practitioners of several specialisms other than my own. Whether more or less perceptibly, this lecture is indebted to Fellows of the Academy as diverse as Tony Atkinson, Amartya Sen, Duncan Gallie, José Harris, and Donald Winch, as well as, and not least, to Sir Michael Rutter FRS.

The agenda implied by my title is, initially at least, straightforward. Nobody studying human institutions and societies, however superficially, can fail to see that some people in some social roles outrank some others, however minimal, under some conditions, the differences in power and privilege may be. The term 'underclass' can accordingly be used simply to denote any category of people whose roles are, for whatever reason, ranked distinctly below everybody else's in the community or society of which they are members. There is no implication that they must be in those roles because they are bad people—or, conversely, because their rulers are bad people. That, as always, depends on your personal moral and political values. It is a question for science and scholarship why the roles are the roles they are, and the people in them the people in them. Nor does the existence of an underclass, so defined, carry any implication about the nature or range of inequalities between the roles located above it. No doubt you can, if you want to, define the underclass as the unfortunate fifty per cent of the population who fall below the median on whatever measure of power and privilege you choose to apply. But what would be the point of doing so? The point about the term 'underclass', as I interpret it, is the twofold implication that some kinds of roles are *inevitably* located distinctly below the rest in the society in question and that some kinds of people are *inescapably* located in them.

To say this, however, still leaves much scope for debate about how underprivileged relative to the rest of the population a group or category of people has to be in order to be considered as an 'underclass', just as there is always scope for debate about how high a temperature counts as a fever or how much hair loss makes a person bald. Likewise, there is always scope for debate both about how many people there need to be in any set of roles to constitute a 'class' of any kind, and about how long they need to remain in it to count as its members. Does an

‘underclass’ include any and all persons or families or households lacking whatever, in Adam Smith’s well-known phrase, ‘the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people’?² Does it include a handful of homeless dossers or petty recidivists, or only whole armies of wandering mendicants or forced labourers? Does it include apprentices tied to their masters for their early adult lives, self-employed proprietors ruined late in life, and widows ending their days in the geriatric ward of a poor law hospital, or only apprentices refused the discharge of their indentures, undischarged bankrupts in perpetual debt, and widows who were in penury even during their late husbands’ lifetimes? Does it include all the long-term unemployed, or only those in households where nobody else is in work or without extended family help of any kind? And how long-term is ‘long-term’—two years, or twenty?

There will, accordingly, always be arguable borderline cases. But for that among other reasons, I want to suggest that the question in my title can be approached to good effect by way of the concepts of individual and collective mobility in social space as sociologists conventionally define them.

I do not pretend that there can thereby be sifted out of debates about the underclass all the understandable emotions and predictable prejudices which the topic arouses, as much in academic gatherings as elsewhere. But I do believe that it can make it easier for these debates to be conducted *sine ira et studio* and for the disputants to stop talking—or preaching—past each other to the extent that they do. Individual mobility is the movement of people out of one role into another which is located either above or below it; collective mobility is the upward or downward movement of roles in relation to each other. Like many such distinctions, it isn’t quite as clear-cut as it appears at first sight; and it needs to be elaborated in terms of the further distinction between intra- and inter-generational mobility. But by way of illustration, consider a hypothetical society ruled by an all-powerful despot whose unmistakable underclass is a category of people born into chattel slavery. What are the routes by which they or, as it may be, their children might escape from it? One way might be through loyal service to the despot rewarded by manumission on each successive despot’s death: that would be *intra-generational individual* mobility. A second might be through a grant of

² Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (ed. Cannan, 1904), II, 400.

permission by the despot for slaves to purchase freedom for their children: that would be *inter-generational individual* mobility. A third might be through a decision by the despot to abolish slavery itself: that would be *intra-generational collective* mobility. And a fourth might be rescension by the despot of the decree whereby the children of slaves are slaves: that would be *inter-generational collective* mobility. You will no doubt have recognised that even in this copybook example, these distinctions can become blurred. If, for example, *all* first-generation slaves are in fact able to buy freedom for their children, this effectively nullifies the law whereby the children of slaves are slaves. But the fourfold classification does, I suggest, help to clarify the conditions which need to be satisfied if, for any given society, the question in my title is to be answered with a no.

The concept of an underclass has little, if any, application to societies like the hunting and foraging bands of a few dozen people where limited resources are shared, prestige is strictly personal, nobody has a monopoly of the means of coercion, and individuals rather than roles are excluded, marginalised, or oppressed. But for most of the world's population as documented in the ethnographic and historical record, the answer to the question in my title is yes; and the influences which make it yes are both cultural and structural. The cultural influences often involve what has come to be called a 'culture of poverty' as such, whether the poor are the itinerant paupers of the highways and byways, the propertyless hangers-on of magnate patrons, the beggars on the steps of the temples, mosques, and cathedrals, or the unemployed slum-dwellers in the shanty-towns. But even in a 'ghetto culture', so called, roles to which the dominant ideology denies legitimacy may be not unrewarding in economic terms: outcasts and deviants can sometimes make a better living than servants or labourers who obediently conform to their society's values and mores. The creation and perpetuation of underclass subcultures is a function not of differences in income and wealth so much as of the age-old disposition to stigmatise the members of out-groups perceived as not only alien but inferior. In extreme cases, this will involve the denial of opportunity to bear and bring up children at all, so that *inter-generational* mobility is off the agenda entirely. But far short of the extreme cases, the same influences can be observed all over the world. There is no need to go to the villages of Hindu India and their so-called 'untouchables', or the Japanese *Burakumin* whose place of birth condemns them to hereditary outcaste status, or the corpse-carrying blacksmiths of the Marghi of the Western Sudan. We need go

no further than the pseudonymous English town of 'Winston Parva' in the mid-1960s, where the established residents of the so-called 'Village' were to be found systematically stigmatising the incoming residents of the so-called 'Estate'.³ The visiting sociologists who studied them found no hard evidence to support the accusations of bad habits and low morals levelled against the newcomers, who were not significantly different in either upbringing or occupation from the established residents. But the newcomers were powerless to break the cultural stereotype once it had been imposed on them. It can be much the same for immigrants stigmatised as such by their host society, who find themselves locked into the double bind where if they find work they are taking it away from the natives and if they don't they are living at the natives' expense. What is more, the effect often extends to the children of the stigmatised out-group. Not only is the out-group itself denied collective *intra*-generational mobility, but the children of its members are denied individual *inter*-generational mobility because of their origin. Once reaching adulthood within a comprehensively stigmatised subculture, their only hope of individual *intra*-generational mobility is to 'pass' by changing their names, concealing their place of birth, constructing a fictitious genealogy for themselves, or successfully mimicking the appearance and deportment of their social superiors.

The structural influences, by contrast, which create and perpetuate an underclass are quite different. Independently of any cultural stigmatisation, there can still be continuous competition for resources and opportunities to acquire them and thus the potential for consistent losers to be more or less permanently excluded from the access to resources and opportunities enjoyed by the rest of their fellow citizens. Again, there is no need to look far afield. Think only, in British society in the earlier years of this century, of the circumstances of a wholly respectable but unemployed working-class widow with numerous small children and no extended family support, whose late husband had never built up the contribution record which would have entitled her to a pension from the state. It is a predicament vividly described in, for example, the volume of autobiography by Kathleen Dayus published in 1985.⁴ Through a remarkable combination of determination and luck, she succeeded in achieving individual *intra*-generational mobility

³ Norbert Elias and John Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (1965).

⁴ Kathleen Dayus, *Where There's Life* (1985).

into the self-employed middle class. But, as she was well aware, there were many like her who didn't. How, with so little work available at such low wage rates and with so many mouths to feed, could she hope to provide adequately for herself and her family when, in any case, by taking work she forfeited her right to assistance from the state? She was not being held down below the rest of the working class through membership of a stigmatised sub-culture, but by structural exclusion from their less comprehensively limited resources and opportunities. And today, the 15–20% of working-class school-leavers in Tyneside or Teesside who cannot find work, are not in training or further education, and have no entitlement to benefit are, at least for a period, similarly placed. There is, so far as I am aware, no hard evidence showing them to be the feckless wastrels of the cultural stereotype. No doubt there are one or two such (just as there are in the House of Lords). But if they have to make do with protracted periods of idleness, job training schemes with no jobs at the end of them, and what they themselves call 'fiddle jobs' on the margins of the legitimate economy, that is because the structure of their local labour market imposes it on them.

Often, however, cultural and structural influences not only combine with but reinforce one another, as most obviously in the interaction of ethnicity and class. That particular interaction is particularly evident in, although by no means confined to, the United States of America with its unbridled market economy, its ideology of strenuous individualism, and its pre-industrial history of imported slave labour. Indeed, the effects are heightened in the big American cities by demographic and ecological influences which between them virtually imprison those who have been called the 'truly disadvantaged'⁵ in ghettos from which there is no obvious social or geographical exit route other than the one which leads a large number of young black males straight to prison. But down the ages and across the globe societies of all kinds—ancient, medieval and modern, Eastern and Western, feudal, capitalist and socialist, agricultural and industrial, religious and secular, monarchic, oligarchic and democratic—have their characteristic ways of both perpetuating a set of roles distinctively less privileged than the rest and at the same time making it difficult for their incumbents to move out of them.

To compile a list of such societies, however, long as it would be, would still leave the question in my title unanswered. Are there not

⁵ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987).

some sociological conditions under which both the structural and the cultural influences which create and maintain an underclass are so far counteracted that the question ceases to arise? It is obviously not enough, as the American example shows, for a society to have universal suffrage, an egalitarian ideology, and high rates of economic growth. But is there not some way in which a prosperous industrial, or perhaps post-industrial, society with a culturally homogeneous population, an efficient labour market, a redistributive tax system, and extensive public provision of welfare services could either engineer collective upward mobility of its underclass to the point where it would no longer count as such or promote individual mobility out of its underclass to the point that the incumbency of underclass roles was never more than temporary?

The obvious candidates are the 'welfare states' which are so called precisely because their rulers, unlike the others, are held to aspire to create a culture in which no roles are ideologically stigmatised and a structure in which the incumbents of even the least advantaged roles are protected from falling significantly below the level of resources and opportunities attaching to the roles of everyone else. It can hardly fail—can it?—to make a serious and lasting difference when, and for as long as, this is the specific and deliberate objective of those who occupy the topmost political roles.

Yet this reflection, self-evident as it may seem, prompts a disconcerting question. Look at us—the late twentieth-century British, that is. Look at our long tradition of social reformism, our pioneering studies of poverty, our cumulative history of welfare legislation, our inherited ideology of good works and fair dealing, our provision for the unemployed, our national health service, our proportion of national income spent on the social services, our child allowances, our universal schooling, our well-staffed domestic civil service, our research units and university departments of social policy, our citizen's advice bureaux, our free legal aid, and our network of charitable and voluntary associations directed to the relief of hardship and distress. Different people will regard all these things in different ways in the light of their different moral and political values. But they are all a reflection of a deliberate and sustained attempt to mitigate those very influences, both structural and cultural, which I have described. Why, therefore, has the attempt, whatever you may think of it, not been more thoroughly successful than it has?

Much of the answer can be found in the many detailed and

illuminating studies published by social and political historians of different areas and aspects of the British 'welfare state'. Hindsight enables us to see clearly, for example, that relentlessly expanding demand for limited resources was bound to undermine the principle of universal free health care; that national scales of assistance could not be harmonised with locally variable needs; that means-testing would provoke widespread resentment if strictly applied and widespread abuse if not; that generous provision for the unemployed would impose a prohibitively high marginal cost on those returning to low-paid work; that lengthening lifetimes and proportionately shorter working lives would make earnings-related pensions increasingly unfundable; that many people entitled to assistance would fail to claim it, but many people not entitled to it would; that rent controls designed to benefit the poor would undermine the market in privately rented accommodation, while attempts to revive it would increase dependence on subsidies; that single parents would cease to be mainly widows and become mainly young, unmarried mothers whose children many fathers would refuse to support; that community, as opposed to institutional, care for the physically and mentally disabled would require a category of carers who need care themselves; and that the conflict of priorities between helping those thought deserving and deterring those thought undeserving would continue to be as irreconcilable, albeit in different ways, as it had been in the days of the Victorian, or for that matter Elizabethan, poor law.

Underlying these dilemmas, however, is a deeper sociological reason for which successive governments were bound to be confronted by them. The explanation of institutional changes (or, as it may be, their absence) in any society needs to be sought not just in the objectives of rulers and policy-makers but in the nature of the practices which define the society's constituent roles. Policy changes cannot, of course, come about without the active decision of those with the power to initiate them. But we must beware of falling into the fallacy of supposing that to explain the cause of a change is thereby to explain its consequences. Reformers succeed or fail not because of the motives, however well-meaning, which cause them to introduce mutant practices into their society's institutions and thereby alter the existing pattern of roles, but because the environment into which the mutant practices are introduced is or is not favourable to their continuing replication. In Britain after the First World War, the state became involved in the provision of goods and services not just for the aged poor but for some of the least

advantaged of its citizens of working age, in a hitherto unprecedented but subsequently irreversible way. In so doing, it did not merely effect a transfer of resources which the operations of the financial and labour markets would not have brought about by themselves. It also brought into being the novel concept of the 'dole' and the novel role of the 'claimant'—the citizen, that is, entitled to uncovenanted 'benefits' in what was likewise a hitherto unprecedented sense of that word. And as soon as this happened, there came to bear pressures both cultural and structural which had, so to speak, been lying in wait in the environment into which the role emerged.

Culturally, stigmatisation was swift. Claimants became, in the vernacular term for the role, 'scroungers'. However much sympathy might be given—and it was—to the long-term unemployed, recipients of uncovenanted benefits were seen as takers and the working or tax-paying population as givers. To some degree, this reflects the strength of the ideology of work: beggars, vagrants, and idlers are looked down on because they don't in that sense *do* anything. But it reflects also the distinction drawn between different sources of income which enable some people not to have to work when other people do. For all the disapprobation directed at the 'idle rich', the inheritors of what used to be called a 'competence' are no more seriously stigmatised than are the pools or lottery or sweepstake winners or the beneficiaries of high-paying life insurance policies. Although all these people can be said to be getting 'something for nothing', they are not seen as getting it from a fund compulsorily extracted by the state from the pockets of people who earned it. Such extractions are tolerated readily enough if they are seen to be applied to amenities and services from which the population as a whole can be expected to benefit; they are much less readily tolerated if they are seen to be applied to subsidising people who have failed to do as much as it is thought that they could to provide for themselves. Stigmatisation, moreover, is reinforced by the practices defining the relation between the roles of the claimants and the roles of the benefit officials—workers who are by no means extravagantly paid for the by no means easy job that they do, in which they are required to dispense public money to people who in many cases they see as neither needy nor deserving.

Structurally, what happened was the familiar effect of which the best image is the moving staircase: everybody goes up, but the people walking are at the same time moving ahead of the people standing still. In the language of classical economic theory, agents turn out to be

concerned not so much to maximise the sum of individual utilities as to maximise the difference between their utility and other people's. Differentials in resources and opportunities may be narrowed periodically between underclass roles and the roles next above them, but they have a disconcerting way of recreating themselves—particularly in a society with a free market in labour and commodities, where the 'natural effort' (to borrow another famous phrase from Adam Smith) 'of every individual to better his own condition' reopens the gap between the roles of the least advantaged and of the rest, while (to switch metaphors) the 'safety net' allows people to slip through its mesh at the same time as it is itself lifted higher in response to overall increases in welfare. But equivalent pressures are at work where the roles of the underclass and of the groups or categories above them are defined in terms not of market position but patron-client relations, or ideological affiliation, or ethnic or regional identity, or party-political membership. Losers are there for as long as there are winners, and safety-nets are there to catch—by definition—losers who have fallen below everybody else.

That incontestable assertion raises again, however, the issue of individual as opposed to collective mobility, both inter- and intra-generational. Granted that even in 'welfare states', cultural and structural pressures may well perpetuate roles whose incumbents lack resources and opportunities available to the rest of their fellow-citizens, who are the people in them? are they permanently stuck there? and if so, why?

There is by now a substantial amount of sociological research which bears on these questions, although not enough to answer them conclusively. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that for a not negligible minority of the British population the multiple indices of deprivation reinforce one another: there are families whose histories testify all too eloquently to the cumulative effect of inferior housing, poor educational performance, long-term unemployment, alcohol or drug dependence, social isolation, and family breakdown. On the other hand, there are a number of channels of upward mobility open to people who either start their adult lives in underclass roles or drop into them at some later stage: re-entry into the labour market, marriage to a person from a less disadvantaged background, change of domicile, and post-adolescent vocational qualification all enable some people to achieve individual intra-generational mobility. Christopher Jencks has pertinently said of the United States that 'So long as equal opportunity includes the opportunity to be poor, some people will take advantage of

the opportunity',⁶ and the same can no less pertinently be said of Britain. But the converse is that some people will take advantage, and be helped by one means or another to take advantage, of the opportunity to cease to be as comprehensively underprivileged as they or their parents previously were. What is more, even though quite small differences between different social groups can have quite large polarising effects over quite short periods of time, it is equally predictable, statistically speaking, that the probability of a grandchild of four underclass grandparents being in the underclass is substantially less than that of a child of two underclass parents. The underclass in Britain, whoever it may consist of, is not a caste.

That last assertion may be disputed by those disposed to argue that it might as well be, since certain people are predisposed by a combination of genetic inheritance and social environment to occupy roles for which stigmatisation and exclusion are inescapable. But how exactly is *that* assertion to be construed? There can be no serious dispute that some within-group differences in psychological characteristics and related behaviour traits have a genetic component. Like it or not, those inherited traits will in some environments to some degree diminish some people's chances of individual mobility, whether inter- or intra-generational. But nobody knows exactly how genetic and social influences interact—not even the behaviour geneticists whose studies of monozygotic twins separated at birth are currently recasting the terms of the old debates about nature versus nurture, or heredity versus environment. Indeed, not the least interesting of the findings coming out of the big American and other twin and adoption studies is how erratic a predictor of antisocial behaviour at different ages and stages biological parentage seems to be. What we *do* know, in relation to the topic of this lecture, is that between-group differences are more important than within-group differences. Take the textbook example of physical height, whose fit to the famous bell-shaped curve is incontrovertible. It is because of the genes which we have inherited from our two biological parents that some of us are as much taller or shorter than one another as we are. But the short of today are a great deal taller than the short of a century ago, and that is not and could not be because of the workings of natural selection over the much too few generations in question. Natural selection may—and almost certainly does—explain

⁶ Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 5.

more about human social behaviour than was thought plausible a generation ago. Indeed, it may well underlie the age-old disposition to stigmatise out-groups which I spoke of earlier on. But where the children of underclass parents are found in the underclass themselves, it is not because, given their genetic inheritance, it could not be otherwise.

So: does or does not any large, complex society like ours have to have an underclass as I have defined it?

Imagine a populous industrial society which is, however, not particularly prosperous, not particularly egalitarian, and not particularly democratic. Its government has, and is prepared to apply, power of direction over its labour force, both male and female, but there is in any case a substantial requirement for unskilled labour. At the same time, the Military Participation Ratio, as sociologists call it, is high: many men and some women are conscripted into the armed forces as soon as they reach adulthood. Food and clothing are rationed, and the rationing system is enforced by an extensive bureaucracy supported by a well-staffed police and intelligence service. Despite an official rhetoric of common endeavour, fair shares, and equal sacrifice for the general good, any visiting sociologist will quickly detect a range both of economic classes and of hierarchically-ordered status-groups with distinctive life-styles, as well as systematic discrimination in favour of men relative to women. A certain level of secondary as well as primary education is free, but the sons and daughters of parents in the higher-ranked roles enjoy a longer and better education, a more comfortable lifestyle, and significantly better prospects of a lucrative and satisfying career than the rest. Every adult has the vote, but no national elections are held: political decisions are all taken by and within a coalition government which claims to represent the people as a whole. The state does, however, acknowledge direct responsibility for the welfare of the least advantaged: widows receive pensions, orphans are brought up at public expense, schoolchildren are entitled to subsidised meals, and basic medical services are locally available to the sick and infirm even if unable to pay for them. There is a criminal sub-culture which is stigmatised as such by the official ideology: indeed, the crimes which are held to be exceptionally serious are punishable by death. But all citizens have equal rights and duties under the law.

The society I have in mind is, as you will have guessed, Britain during the Second World War. In depicting it as I have, I make no claim for the virtue, as socially defined, either of its rulers or of its people. All sorts of things went on of a kind that the official ideology

deplored: profiteering, black marketeering, malingering, pilfering, bureaucratic high-handedness and maladministration, abuse of police powers, domestic violence, marital desertion, illegitimate births, alcoholism, and juvenile delinquency. But the visiting sociologist, however quick to identify marked differentials of power and privilege in the economic, ideological, and political dimensions of the structure alike, would have been hard put to it to identify an underclass as such. Where was there a distinctive set of inevitably under-privileged roles located significantly below the rest? Where was there an identifiable group or category of men or women of working age inescapably excluded from participation in the society's economic, ideological, and political institutions other than for reasons of strictly personal incapacity? The 'lower deck', to speak both literally and metaphorically, might harbour any amount of resentment at a system which they might, and did, describe in their own proverbial idiom as 'men for'ard and pigs aft'. But who was there to be equated with William Julius Wilson's 'truly disadvantaged' trapped in ghettos from which there is no escape? The young adult males on the lower deck could, in one respect, be said to be not unlike the young adult males of the hunting and foraging bands: however limited their shared resources or severe their shared discomforts, any distinctive stigmatisation or exclusion which any of them suffered was based on their individual attributes, not on their warrior roles.

This is not to say that a society like ours is bound to have an underclass except when at war. But I am no more able than any other sociologist to tell you what policies in what societies under what conditions could be guaranteed to abolish an existing underclass, let alone guaranteed to neutralise any prospect of its subsequent re-emergence. I can do no more than propose, by way of conclusion, that in a society like ours both collective and individual mobility *could*, in theory, be promoted by governments in ways which, however unlikely or undesirable you may think them, are neither a logical nor an empirical impossibility.

One way, after all, to engineer *collective* mobility is simply by extending compulsory training and direction of labour as and where necessary for civilian as well as military purposes. No doubt there would always be drop-outs, just as there are always deserters from the armed forces; and no doubt the bureaucracy necessary to administer the system would be both extensive and cumbersome. But would a society where all adults of working age were in this way treated alike, and where they

also shared a common entitlement to public health services, subsidised housing, free education for their children, and pensions when retired be said still to have an underclass?

You may, of course, say (and probably will) that compulsion of this order would be unacceptable in a society like ours, not least to many of those whom it was intended to benefit. But then, what about a welfare state in which the labour market remains free, but benefit fraud is actively tolerated on a massive scale? Those without regular employment are able to contrive incomes for themselves and their families at least equivalent to those of the least well-paid employees, and low-skilled employees at risk of falling into long-term unemployment are protected by both subsidised job-creation and deliberately licensed absenteeism—notional sick pay without a doctor's certificate which carries no stigma and substitutes for the dole payments which might otherwise have to be made to a correspondingly larger number of claimants. To anybody who thinks this last idea is nothing more than a lecture-room fantasy, I have to say that some twenty years ago I observed at first hand fifteen to twenty per cent consistent and predictable absenteeism on precisely this basis in a Swedish subsidiary of a British-owned manufacturing company, and it seemed to me that as long as the exploitation of the national benefit system in that country was tempered to within acceptable limits by local custom and practice, as it was, there was nothing unworkable about it.

Similarly, there are at least *some* things which the governments of welfare states can, in theory, do to increase *individual* upward mobility out of underclass roles and shorten the time which those in them have to spend there. Positive discrimination, whatever may be its consequential drawbacks can, inter-generationally, bring some children of underclass parents into the educational system in such a way as to give them qualifications they couldn't otherwise obtain; and intra-generationally, it can bring people in underclass roles into the labour market in roles from which they would otherwise continue to be excluded.

Nor is positive discrimination the only way in which individual upward mobility could actively be promoted by a government disposed to do so. If families are relocated from an inner-city area to a socially integrated suburb, the children may be less likely to drop out of school, fail to find employment, and become involved in activities socially defined as 'delinquent'. Even if they go on living where they do but go to a school in a different area, their chances of individual inter-generational mobility may be increased, including by way of what

sociologists call 'hypergamy' or 'marrying up'. To this, the obvious rejoinder is that 'social mixing', so called, is very much easier said than done. You don't need a degree in sociology to be aware of the structural pressures which, in a society like ours, create the patterns of residential and social segregation with which we are all familiar, and you don't need to deploy the acronym NIMBY to be aware of the cultural attitudes which sustain it. But I am saying no more than that it is not impossible, sociologically speaking, for the government of a society like ours to do some things which will to some degree diminish the probability of children born into underclass families becoming underclass parents in their turn—whatever the unintended ancillary consequences to which, as always, the government's social policies might then give rise.

Beyond this point, however, I can go no further without dipping more than my toes in the stormy sea. When it comes to the policy agenda, we all have our personal wishes and hopes and values, including our personal trade-offs between equality and freedom, and it is for philosophers, not sociologists, to say whose values and trade-offs should count for how much against whose. I began with a reference to a lecture by Max Weber, and I should like to end it with a quotation from an earlier article of his: 'An empirical *Wissenschaft*', said Weber in 1904, 'can tell nobody what they ought to do but only what they can and—under certain circumstances—what they want to'.⁷

⁷ Max Weber, 'Die "Objektivität" Sozialwissenschaftlicher und Sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen, 1951), p. 151.